

Rome v Carthage: an epic enmity

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The curse of Carthage: Vergil's contribution

Readers of the fourth book of Vergil's *Aeneid* will be familiar with the memorable scene in which Dido, Queen of Carthage, deserted by her lover Aeneas, in pursuit of his destiny to found the Roman nation, prophesies in her dying words the everlasting opposition between her people and the Roman nation of Aeneas.

*This is my last prayer. I pour it out with my lifeblood.
Let you, my Tyrians, sharpen your hatred upon his
children
And all their descendants for ever: send this as a
present to
My ghost. Between my people and his, no love, no
alliance.*

Like so many other aspects of Vergil's epic, this episode provides a mythical aetiology (or explanation) for real events in Roman history – in this case, the long and bitter series of 'Punic' wars between Rome and Carthage in the third and second centuries B.C..

A tale of epic proportions

But Vergil was not the only poet to consider the great series of wars between Rome and Carthage worthy of epic mention. The first-century A.D. writer, Silius Italicus, retired after a legal and political career to devote himself to poetry. In his retirement he produced an epic devoted entirely to the wars hinted at by Vergil, and called the *Punica*. Although this work was probably unfinished at the time of Silius' death, it is, nonetheless, the longest extant poem in Latin, and tells in some 12,200 hexameters, divided between 17 or 18 books, of the Second Punic War – the bitter conflict in which Rome eventually defeated the Carthaginian general, Hannibal.

By choosing as its theme the great wars between Rome and Carthage in the Republican period, Silius' epic deals with some of the middle-ground between Vergil's epic treatment of the foundation of Rome, and Lucan's epic lament, written under Nero's reign, at Rome's collapse into internal conflict between Caesar and Pompey at the end of the Republic. His work is clearly influenced by and responding to many texts, including Livy's history of Rome from its foundations. But here I shall focus on the relationship between Silius' *Punica* and Vergil's *Aeneid*, and look in particular at the figure of Hannibal.

Hannibal: villain or hero?

The complex figure of Hannibal dominates the *Punica*. For most readers of Silius' poem, however, Hannibal is too demonically opposed to Rome to be in any straightforward sense a hero. However, our reading of Hannibal as a villain becomes more complicated if we read the *Punica* against the literary backdrop of the *Aeneid*.

As we have seen, Vergil's poem had already hinted at themes in the relationship between Rome and Carthage which Silius would pick up and develop, and one of these is Hannibal as Dido's avenger and as symbol of Carthage. One of the most memorable scenes in Silius' poem takes place in the Carthaginian temple of Dido, forming a powerful link between

Vergil's epic and his own. Here Hamilcar, Hannibal's father, forces his son to swear to destroy Rome. Silius' Hannibal himself clearly calls to mind both that scene and the Dido's cry for vengeance in his speech later in the epic.

*My son, O, you who are the hope of towering Carthage
and no less the terror of the Aeneadae, may you, I pray,
be greater in glory than your father and establish for your-
self fame through deeds by which you surpass, as a
warrior, your grandfather... I recognize my/your father's
face, the threatening eyes beneath a fierce brow, the deep
crying, and the seeds of the same anger as my own. If by
chance one of the gods should cut short my great achieve-
ments and by my death check my career at its beginning,
you, my wife, must strive to preserve this surety of war.
And when it is given to him to speak, lead him through my
childhood experiences: let him touch Elissa's altar with
his childish hands and swear to his father's ashes that he
will bring war to Italy.*

Hannibal here echoes both Homer's Hector in *Iliad* 6 and Vergil's Aeneas in *Aeneid* 12. But we shall see how, by setting Hannibal in the context of other epic heroes through the theme of vengeance, Silius raises questions about how heroic Hannibal, the villain of Roman history, might be, and also makes us wonder 'genuine' Roman heroes such as Aeneas are really so heroic after all.

Aeneas and Hannibal

Looking at Aeneas through the filter of a frenzied, obsessive Hannibal, adds some weight to the concern that Aeneas sets *his* son, Ascanius, a bad example of inclemency in *Aeneid* 12. And at the same time, similarities and parallels between Aeneas and Hannibal may make Rome's longstanding enemies, the Carthaginians, seem less alien than the great foe perhaps *should* be.

We can always argue that any similarity between Aeneas and Hannibal is either outweighed by, or actually emphasizes, their differences. Perhaps the most important difference of all is the racial opposition foreshadowed by Vergil's 'Carthage against (*contra*) Italy' in Book 1. For some readers, Vergil's Dido and Silius' Hannibal are irredeemably flawed as characters by the fact that they are identified with, or even come to embody, Rome's implacable enemy. If, however, the light of history shines harshly upon Dido and Hannibal, its severity is surely mitigated by the opportunities we are given to see events through their eyes.

Reading Hannibal's shield, reading Vergil's Dido: Re-reading Roman history

One such opportunity occurs spectacularly in the second book of the *Punica*, when Hannibal is presented with a shield and the images on it are described.

*He [Hannibal] scans each detail in triumph and with
delighted eyes and rejoices in the beginnings of his king-
dom: Dido was founding the citadels of earliest Carthage,
and having landed the fleet, her young men were pressing*

on with work... Amid these scenes Aeneas was to be seen, his fleet and followers lost, shipwrecked and beseeching with his right hand. The unfortunate queen looked eagerly upon him with cloudless brow and an expression that was already friendly. Next Gallician hands had created a cave and the lovers' secret pledges; the shouting and the barking of dogs rose into the air, and, panicked by sudden rain, the horse-riding huntsman sheltered in the forest. Close by, the fleet of Aeneadae had now deserted the shore and was on the sea, while Elissa vainly recalled it. Dido herself stood wounded on a huge pyre and commanded future Carthaginians to carry out vengeful wars; and from mid-sea the Dardan looked upon the blazing pile and spread his sails to his great destiny. In another part, Hannibal made supplication at hellish altars, offered, with the Stygian prophetess, a secret libation of blood, and swore to wars with the Aeneadae from his earliest days.

The images from Dido's Carthage that Hannibal sees here are clearly linked to *Aeneid* Books 1 and 4, but offer an apparently pro-Carthaginian revision of Vergil's epic. Silius' description especially recalls Dido's suffering and loss. The first adjective that qualifies Silius' Dido is *infelix* (unfortunate), just as Vergil repeatedly characterizes his love-struck Dido. In the final view of Dido that Silius here grants to Hannibal and to us, she is, as in the first verse of *Aeneid* 4, *saucia* (wounded). Silius' description perhaps leaves Aeneas' failings implicit rather than making them explicit; but we, and Hannibal, see Dido respond kindly to his desperation; we 'see' their secret pledges (*furtiva foedera*); and we 'see' Aeneas break this pledge of faith as he deserts Dido. If reference to Aeneas' 'great destiny' here seems to condone that desertion, it is worth recalling that Hannibal is our partner in interpreting the images on his shield, and expressing such a 'Roman thought' with a Carthaginian sneer, which might make the reader too doubt the value of Aeneas' mission. In replaying scenes from the *Aeneid* that are questioning Aeneas' behaviour and heroism, then Silius' description of Hannibal's shield firmly opposes any tendency in Vergil's epic (especially, and significantly, in the famous description of the shield given to Aeneas in Book 8) to present a view of history seen through Roman eyes.

In spite of the fact that Hannibal will be defeated, he dominates the *Punica*. Silius seems to be using him as a character through which to respond to Vergil's *Aeneid*; Hannibal also has a voice which challenges that of the poem's pro-Roman narrator. The shield description of Book 2 tends towards a justification for Punic opposition to Rome that cannot be dismissed as the product of Carthaginian economy with the truth. What Silius' Hannibal sees on the shield recalls precisely those aspects of the Vergilian Aeneas' association with Dido that are problematic for Aeneas' heroic status; and, in particular, it brings to mind the possibility that in Vergil's Dido-episode, infidelity is not, as stereotypically, a Punic vice, but a crime committed by Dido's proto-Roman lover.

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For more on Silius, try Don Fowler's 'Even Better than the Real Thing: A Tale of Two Cities' in his *Roman Constructions: Readings in Postmodern Latin* published by Oxford University Press.